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THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

THE University of Paris was distinguished from all other universities of the Middle Ages by its prominence in political affairs. While the great schools of Italy, Germany, and England held aloof from secular politics, the *civitas philosophorum* on Mt. Ste. Geneviève often asserted itself as a potent factor in the political life of France. The learned doctors of Paris seem indeed often to have been more interested in the strife of party factions than in the disputations of their scholars, and at times the University acted as if it were an important organ of the state rather than a school of learning.¹

We hear little of its participation in political affairs before the years 1356-1358, when it took part in the stirring events associated with the name of Étienne Marcel. Its political rôle in the conflict between Marcel and the Dauphin of France has often been exaggerated. The University was twice called upon to mediate between the two parties, but did not openly espouse the cause of either faction, though it was inclined to favor the cause of the Dauphin.²

It does not seem to have intervened in secular politics during the reign of Charles V. (1364-1380), but came into political prominence under his successor, Charles VI., especially during the struggle between the Burgundians and Armagnacs. In fact, the years 1405-1422 comprise the period when the University was most active in the affairs of the state. During this period it was usually in sympathy with the Burgundians, but strove to mediate between the two parties and to establish peace.

Its attitude as a peace-maker is illustrated by many documents in the *Chartularium*. In 1405 the rector and divers "solemn" doctors admonished the Duke of Orléans to look to the reforma-

¹ The older historians of the University, Du Boulay, Crevier, and Dubarle, devote little attention to its political activity, but some of the documents in Du Boulay's book are useful. Nor does this subject fall within the scope of the first volume of Denifle's epoch-making work (*Die Universitäten des Mittelalters*, 1885). It is briefly examined in Rashdall's *Universities of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1895), Vol. I., Ch. V., § 6. The fourth volume of Denifle's *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis* (Paris, 1897), which covers the years 1394-1452, now enables the investigator adequately to deal with the subject.

² Jourdain, in *Revue des Questions Historiques*, 1878, XXIV. 548-566; and in his *Excursions Historiques* (Paris, 1888), 339-361.

tion of the realm and to effect a reconciliation with the Duke of Burgundy. Louis of Orléans angrily retorted: "As you do not consult knights in questions of religion, so you ought not to meddle in questions of war; therefore return to your books and attend to your own affairs, for, though the University is called the daughter of the king, she should not interfere with the government of the kingdom."¹ In 1408 Gerson, on behalf of the University, strove to reconcile the two dukes;² and in 1410 certain masters were sent to exhort the Duke of Berri to establish peace "for the honor and welfare of the king and the kingdom." The deputation was instructed to state that in the dissensions between the princes of the royal house the University wishes to act as "the loyal daughter of the king," to refrain from all partisanship, and to mediate by exhorting both parties to make peace, for it is her duty by reason of her profession (*ex sua professione*) to work for peace, "as she always has been accustomed to do."³ After their interview with the Duke of Berri the deputies requested the King to restore tranquillity by removing the heads of the two parties (the Dukes of Berri and Burgundy) from the government and by replacing them with men devoted to the public welfare. This proposition was accepted and carried out.⁴ In 1410 and again in 1412 the University implored the Duke of Burgundy to establish peace in the realm.⁵ It also sent delegates to various councils assembled to deliberate concerning terms of peace (for example, at Auxerre in 1412, at Pontoise in 1413, at Troyes in 1420, at Arras in 1435),⁶ and issued letters confirming or approving treaties of peace.⁷ In 1413, at a congregation of the University at which the Dukes of Guienne, Berri, and Burgundy, with many other magnates, were present, the chancellor of the Duke of Guienne solemnly rendered thanks to the assembled masters for having labored zealously to establish peace.⁸

During Charles VI.'s reign the rector and masters also exhibited much zeal for the improvement of the government of France. In 1405, in presence of the princes of the royal house, Gerson (*ex parte universitatis*) delivered an oration on the reformation of the chief

¹ *Chartularium*, IV. 135.

² *Ibid.*, IV. 160.

³ *Ibid.*, IV. 188. In 1432 and 1444 the University again asserts that "by reason of her profession" she strives for the peace and tranquillity of the realm. (*Ibid.*, IV. 547, 646.)

⁴ *Chronique du Religieux de Saint-Denys*, IV. 372-384; cf. Valois, *Le Grand Conseil*, 118-120.

⁵ *Chartularium*, IV. 189, 239-241; see also *ibid.*, IV. 547.

⁶ *Ibid.*, IV. 241, 259, 377, 565-571.

⁷ For example, in 1413 and 1420 (*ibid.*, IV. 259, 261, 380).

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV. 261.

branches of government, especially the king's council, the judiciary, the army, and taxation; he said that "the daughter of the king" is, as it were, the eye of France, which must always be vigilant for the welfare of the realm.¹ Again, in 1413, in presence of the King, Gerson indicated (*nomine universitatis*) how the evils of the past might be avoided and how the realm might be well governed in the future.² In 1413 the University took a very prominent part in the agitation which led to the adoption of the Cabochian Ordinance, the Magna Charta of medieval France;³ and in 1416 the rector and various doctors deliberated with the Parlement of Paris as to the measures which should be taken against evil-doers who pillage the king's subjects.⁴

The political activity of the University also manifests itself in the relations of France to foreign powers, especially to England. In 1412 the rector and masters write to the King that the English should be driven from the duchy of Normandy, which they have invaded; similar letters were sent to the Dukes of Guienne and Burgundy;⁵ and in 1418 the University beseeches the King and the Duke of Burgundy to relieve Rouen, which is besieged by the English.⁶ Soon afterwards, however, we find the rector and masters acting in sympathy with England. In 1420 they accepted the Treaty of Troyes, and in 1422 gave thanks because Henry V. had taken Melun from Charles VII.; in 1424 they celebrated the victories of the English over the French, and urged Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, to desist from his plan of warfare against the Duke of Burgundy because such warfare might endanger the union of France and England.⁷ The University also manifested much zeal in the persecution of Joan of Arc.⁸

After Charles VII. had succeeded in making headway against the English and in asserting his authority in France, it could not be expected that he should look with favor on the Parisian masters who had consorted with his enemies in the dark days preceding the advent of Joan of Arc. In the second half of his reign the University was no longer a power in the political life of France; and

¹ *Chartularium*, IV. 136; Schwab, *Gerson*, 417.

² *Ibid.*, IV. 261.

³ *Ibid.*, IV. 252-253, 257; Coville, *Les Cabochiens* (Paris, 1888). Coville, pp. 115-133, gives an interesting account of the political influence and political theories of the University.

⁴ *Chartularium*, IV. 320.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV. 243-244.

⁶ *Ibid.*, IV. 357. The rector and masters also issued a proclamation calling upon the French cities to aid the King against the English, "the ancient enemies" of France (*Ibid.*, IV. 355-356).

⁷ *Ibid.*, IV. 380, 403, 435, 437; see also *ibid.*, IV. 413.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV. 510-528. For the relations of the University to Henry V. and Henry VI. (1420-1437), see Jourdain, *Excursions Historiques*, 311-335.

in 1446 one of the bulwarks of its ancient independence was swept away by a royal edict which made the University subject to the jurisdiction of the Parlement of Paris.¹ Another of the most precious academic privileges, exemption from taxation, was also assailed by that monarch.² While his son Louis XI. sat on the throne, "the eldest daughter" of the king was under stern parental control which would not brook any interference in political affairs. In 1467 Louis informed a deputation of the University that the old practice of meddling with the quarrels of princes must not be renewed,³ and there is no evidence that it was renewed during his reign. In 1483, when the rector and masters approved the treaty of peace between Louis XI. and Maximilian of Austria, they simply acted as the docile instrument of the crown: they had been commanded to give their approval to the treaty, and they answered that they were always "ready to do all that the king may be pleased to order."⁴ In 1485, during the minority of Louis XI.'s successor, Louis of Orléans asked the University for its support against Anne of Beaujeu, the regent of France, but it prudently refrained from interfering in the strife of factions.⁵ When Louis of Orléans became King of France he refused to recognize the right of the University to suspend its lectures and sermons, and hence in 1499 this ancient weapon of academic aggression was used for the last time.⁶ Thus under Charles VII. and his three successors the independence and influence of the great corporation of masters gradually declined, and the University ceased to be a political power.

Having determined the scope of its political activity, we are now prepared to deal with the causes which led the University to assert itself in politics. First it should be noted that the position of the rector and masters as an independent and privileged corporation, accustomed to self-government and free discussion, gave them a consciousness of strength and an aptitude for political agitation. Then, too, the situation of the University in a great capital brought the academic body in close touch with the political life of France. Moreover, this body was well adapted to diffuse political ideas and to mould public opinion; for its masters filled most of the pulpits in Paris and held many benefices in other parts of France.⁷ Therefore the approbation of the University was courted by the king and by the leaders of party factions. For example, in 1411 Charles VI.

¹ *Chartularium*, IV. 669.

² Beaucourt, *Histoire de Charles VII.*, IV. 326.

³ Du Boulay, V. 681.

⁴ *Ibid.*, V. 755-757.

⁵ *Ibid.*, V. 767; Crevier, IV. 417-419.

⁶ Du Boulay, V. 830-834; Dubarle, I. 337-339.

⁷ Rashdall, *Universities*, I. 421; cf. *ibid.*, I. 532-535; *Chartularium*, IV. 648.

complained that the Dukes of Berri and Orléans were trying to destroy his authority, and requested the rector and masters to cause this fact "to be published and preached in churches and elsewhere throughout the realm."¹

The various circumstances or considerations which we have thus far set forth do not suffice, however, to explain the political rôle of the University; they were simply conditions which would favor or facilitate the exercise of political power. In seeking the true explanation of this power, we must remember that the activity of the University in public affairs was largely confined to the reign of Charles VI.; in no other reign did the rector and masters take the initiative in secular politics. It is not surprising that during the disorders of the first quarter of the fourteenth century, when a mad king sat on the throne and the realm was rent asunder by party strife, the great school of Paris should exert its influence in behalf of peace and good government. It would feel impelled to do this by a mere sense of patriotic duty (*ex sua professione*); for the rector and masters held a high place in the religious and educational world, and their opinions on any subject would naturally receive attention. They were aroused to action by the appalling condition of things in France, by "the pitiable desolation of the realm," by "the iniquities intolerable and painful to the hearts of all good Frenchmen."² Moreover, the material welfare of the University and at times even its very existence seemed to be jeopardized by the struggle between the Burgundians and Armagnacs. In 1410 the rector informs the King that the University is inclined to abandon Paris, because, owing to the depredations of the troops of both factions, food cannot be provided and property is unprotected;³ and in 1418 the rector joins with the Parlement of Paris in a request that the King should take measures against these troops, in order that the necessities of life may not be wanting in Paris.⁴ Again, in 1412 the Dukes of Orléans and Berri tried, for political reasons, to secure the removal of the University from Paris.⁵ We should scarcely expect the rector and masters to remain passive when the body politic of France was paralyzed and the University itself was threatened with ruin.

The prominence of the University in the Great Schism may also have given an impulse to its activity in the affairs of the state. The

¹ *Chartularium*, IV. 219.

² *Ibid.*, IV. 188-189, 241, 259-260, 355.

³ *Ibid.*, IV. 191.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV. 351. In 1410 the rector and masters complained of the desolate condition of Paris, and in 1418 deliberated with the Parlement concerning the lack of provisions and fuel in Paris (*ibid.*, IV. 189, 354).

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV. 235.

discord in the Church concerned the welfare of all the nations of western Europe ; kings as well as prelates were interested in the strife between the rival popes. Throughout the struggle, therefore, we find all kinds of politics intermingled, religious and secular, national and international. The University, as a great organ of the Church, was soon engaged in making zealous efforts to bring the Schism to an end, but its zeal was often leavened by the fiats of princes. Thus in 1379 Charles V. virtually coerced the rector and masters to declare for Clement VII.; in 1381 the Duke of Anjou, the regent of France, opposed their efforts to promote harmony by means of a general council ; in 1391 Charles VI. imposed silence upon them when they exhorted him to secure the union of the Church ; in 1394 the King permitted them to find some way of ending the Schism, and appointed deputies to confer with them on this subject.¹ In 1381 a contemporary poet exhorts the king to allow the masters greater freedom of speech in the discussion of the Schism :

„ Roy, laisse seurement les clerics de Paris fere
Sermens, disputoisons au pour et au contraire.”²

In fact, at every stage of the great struggle secular as well as religious politics are visible, and in the conciliar movement the University, like a sovereign power, negotiates with the French crown, with the rival popes, and with continental princes. Now we venture to suggest that its efforts in behalf of peace and reform in the Church would naturally prepare the way for the exercise of its influence in behalf of peace and reform in the kingdom of France during the dark days of Charles VI.: the semi-secular activity of the rector and masters in church politics would predispose them to participate in the purely secular politics of France.

Thus the disorders of the time of Charles VI., which threatened the kingdom of France and the University of Paris with ruin, coupled with the prominent *rôle* which the latter had already played in ecclesiastical politics, sufficiently explain its prominent *rôle* in public affairs during the first quarter of the fourteenth century. If these disorders and the impotence of the crown had continued under Charles VII. and Louis XI., the University would probably have held its place as an important factor in the political life of the nation. As the weakness of the papacy gave the University the opportunity to assert its authority in the Church, so the weakness of the crown gave it the opportunity to assert its authority in the state.

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¹ *Chartularium*, III. 564, 583, 595, 603. For other illustrations see *ibid.*, III. 552-639 ; and Valois, *La France et le Grand Schisme* (2 vols., Paris, 1896).

² Valois, I. 350.